

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Temptations to Sin

Luke 17:1-4

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Scripture

The closer Jesus got to Jerusalem and his crucifixion, the more he taught his disciples about important aspects regarding Christian discipleship. Jesus wanted his disciples to display to the world the characteristics of those who were members of his kingdom. In today's lesson, Jesus addressed the topic of dealing with sin in the community of disciples.

Let's read about temptations to sin in Luke 17:1-4:

¹ And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:1-4)

Introduction

Saint Augustine once said, "Man is a good thing spoiled."¹ By that he meant that God's creation of man, which God pronounced as "very good" (Genesis 2:31), was horribly marred after man fell into sin. Since that first sin all people in all ages and in all cultures struggle with sin. John Blanchard said, "We are born in sin and spend our lives coping with the consequences."² That is so true, isn't it?

¹ *Tabletalk Magazine, July 2000: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2000), 59.

² John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2006), 597.

But, thankfully, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to seek and to save lost sinners. Jesus would eventually go to the cross and pay the penalty for all of our sin. But although Jesus paid the *penalty* for our sin, we still have to deal with the *presence* of sin in our lives. Sin will not be eradicated in us until we see Jesus face to face. Until then, we still wrestle with sin.

So, while he was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus taught his disciples how to deal with sin in the community of disciples. It is a lesson that all Jesus' followers need to learn and put into practice on a daily basis.

Lesson

The analysis of sin in Luke 17:1-4 teaches us about how to deal with sin.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Temptations to Sin (17:1-3a)
2. Forgiveness of Sin (17:3b-4)

I. Temptations to Sin (17:1-3a)

First, let's look at temptations to sin.

Jesus shifted the focus of his attention back to his own disciples. He wanted them to understand some important truths about Christian discipleship. Specifically, he addressed the issue of sin. In the verses dealing with temptations to sin, Jesus issued three warnings to disciples.

A. *Woe to the Tempter (17:1)*

The first warning is woe to the tempter.

In Luke 17:1 we read that Jesus **said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"**

Jesus knew that all people in all ages and in all cultures struggle with sin. There is no one who does not struggle with sin. However, in this verse Jesus talked about **temptations to sin**. The Greek word (*skandala*) means “occasion to fall (of stumbling), offence, thing that offends, stumbling block.”³ So, as Philip Ryken says, “Here in Luke it seems clear that Jesus is talking about something that causes people to fall down spiritually, something that leads them sinfully astray.”⁴

How do we lead people astray? Philip Ryken suggests some ways we lead people astray:

We do it any time our actions or attitudes set a bad spiritual example. We do it when our complaining spirit causes other people to be discontent. We do it by speaking evil words that unfairly influence someone else’s opinion. We do it by carrying on an argument to the point where we provoke an angry response. We do it by enticing someone to commit sexual sin or join us for some juicy gossip. We do it by boasting of our accomplishments or acquisitions in a way that makes other people envious or boastful. These are only some of the many ways that we can become a spiritual hindrance to other people.⁵

I am sure you can think of many other ways that you can cause people to fall down spiritually.

Now the person being tempted has to take responsibility for his own actions. The fact that he has been led into sin does not exonerate him from his own sinful actions.

Nevertheless, the warning is given to the one who causes people to fall down spiritually. Jesus said in verse 1b, “**But woe to the one through whom they come!**” The word for **woe**

³ James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 65.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 208–209.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 209.

(*ouai*) is an “exclamation of grief.”⁶ Jesus meant that it was a terribly grievous thing to cause someone to stumble.

Is there anything that you say or do that is leading someone to stumble into sin? Are you making it easier for people to sin? Or, are you making it harder for people to be godly?

So, be warned: grief awaits the one who tempts others to sin.

B. Terrible Fate of the Tempter (17:2)

The second warning has to do with the terrible fate of the tempter.

Jesus said of the tempter in verse 2, **“It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.”**

Jesus spoke about the **little ones** who were led into sin by the tempter. The **“little ones”** sometimes referred to children (e.g., Matthew 8:10). Sometimes **“little ones”** referred to anyone who was a follower of Jesus Christ, including the original disciples (see Mark 10:24; Luke 10:21). In that sense we who are disciples of Jesus Christ are all **“little ones”** who need his special protection and spiritual care. But, the context of this particular warning by Jesus suggests that he was referring more specifically to people who were just beginning to follow him, such as the tax collectors and sinners (see Luke 15:1-2). And, as Philip Ryken said, “New believers are at the most vulnerable stage of their Christian experience, and more experienced disciples need to be very careful not to lead them astray.”⁷

Jesus was very clear that it would be better to die a vio-

⁶ James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible*, 53.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 209.

lent death by drowning than to lead other believers, especially new believers, into sin. Jesus warned that a terrible fate awaited the tempter. Of course, if the tempter is a Christian, he will not – indeed, he cannot – lose his salvation. But he will suffer loss of reward in heaven.

Philip Ryken recounted what happened to someone who caused young believers to stumble into sin:

Bruce McDowell, who is minister of global outreach at Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, tells the story of two grade-school children who were led into grievous sin by someone who ought to have known better – an older boy from a Christian family. When the sin was discovered, the younger boys were sorry for what they had done, but the older boy never seemed to show any sign of repentance. Several years later the older boy drowned while scuba diving in an undersea cave, and people were reminded of what Jesus said: better for him to be cast into the sea than to lead little ones astray.⁸

God is very concerned that his little ones not be led astray into any sin. It would be far better that any tempter die rather than lead any child of God into sin.

C. Pay Attention to Yourselves! (17:3a)

And the third warning is to pay attention to yourselves!

Jesus concluded his warning regarding temptations to sin by saying in verse 3a, **“Pay attention to yourselves!”**

The Greek word for **pay attention** (*prosechete*) is a present imperative, and it “speaks of a constant watch.”⁹ Jesus' disciples must be very careful about what they teach others.

We must pay attention that we do not lead others into sin.

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 210.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1386.

So, there are three warnings regarding temptations to sin. We are warned about woe or grief that will come to the one who tempts another to sin. We are warned of the terrible fate that awaits the one who causes another to stumble into sin. And we are warned to pay attention to ourselves that we do not lead anyone into sin.

II. Forgiveness of Sin (17:3b-4)

And second, note forgiveness of sin.

Jesus gave three principles regarding forgiveness of sin. These three principles are given to us in sequence.

A. *Rebuke the Sinner (17:3b)*

First, rebuke the sinner.

Jesus said in verse 3b, “**If your brother sins, rebuke him.**”

We have a responsibility to speak to the **brother** (or sister) who **sins**. Given the context, it is possible that Jesus was speaking about a person who was causing people to fall down spiritually or to lead them astray into sin. But the principle would apply to any kind of sin committed by a fellow believer.

Philip Ryken gives very helpful advice on how to **rebuke** a person who sins. He says:

There is a right way and a wrong way to confront sin. We need to go to one another courageously, not timidly, willing to say what needs to be said, no matter what the cost. We need to go to one another gently, not judgmentally, demonstrating the tender mercy of Christ (see Gal. 6:1). We need to go to one another humbly, not proudly, having already confessed our own great sin. We need to go to one another affectionately, not harshly, showing how much we love our brother or sister in Christ. We need to go to one another prayerfully, not impul-

sively, asking God to glorify himself through our ministry of reconciliation. But we do need to go to one another. A sin needs to be called a sin in a way that leads to repentance. Do we care enough to confront, and are we godly enough to do it with Christ-like compassion? It takes grace to do this, and to do it well.¹⁰

So, first, rebuke the sinner.

B. Forgive the Repentant Sinner (17:3c)

Second, forgive the repentant sinner.

Jesus said in verse 3c, **“And if he repents, forgive him.”**

Our hope and prayer in rebuking a person who has sinned is that he will repent. He is confronted with his sin, he acknowledges that he has sinned and, as a result, repents of his sin. In that case, we **forgive him** and the relationship is restored.

But what happens when a person does not repent? What then is our response to the brother who has sinned?

Some have said that Jesus put a qualification on our granting forgiveness because he said, **“And if he repents.”** They understand Jesus to mean that they do not have to grant forgiveness until the brother comes to us and repents to our satisfaction of his sin. Is that what Jesus meant?

I do not believe that Jesus put a qualification on granting forgiveness, for two reasons. First, it is contrary to Jesus’ own example. Jesus forgave the Roman soldiers for crucifying him, and they never asked him for forgiveness (Luke 23:34). And second, Jesus did not put a qualification on granting forgiveness because it is contrary to the point of this passage, where the emphasis falls on forgiveness that is freely offered to the sinner.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 211.

Ryken summarizes, “Surely Jesus wants us to have a forgiving heart toward someone who has done us wrong, even before we have the opportunity to offer formal forgiveness. Surely he does not want us to hold on to a grudge, even when we have been greatly harmed.”¹¹

But the question still remains, why did Jesus say, “**And if he repents**”? Bishop J. C. Ryle gives a very helpful answer. He says, “This expression is remarkable. It doubtless cannot mean, that we are not to forgive men unless they do repent. At this rate there would be much bitterness constantly kept alive. But it does mean that when there is no repentance or regret for an injury done, there can be no renewal of cordial friendship, or complete reconciliation between man and man.”¹²

Jesus taught his disciples that when a person sins a rebuke must be graciously given. Hopefully, it will be graciously received and repentance will be offered. But, whether or not there is repentance, forgiveness must always be granted.

C. Forgive the Repentant Sinner Repeatedly (17:4)

And third, forgive the repentant sinner repeatedly.

Jesus said in verse 4, “**And if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.**”

At this point one may want to question the sincerity of the repentance. How can someone really be repentant if he repents again and again? That is a fair question. The Bible speaks to that in other places. But here Jesus is quite clear. If a person sins and repents, forgive him. And if he sins and repents again, forgive him again. And if he keeps on sinning and repenting, keep on forgiving him.

¹¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 211.

¹² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 225.

Jesus was not opposed to Christians being held spiritually accountable for their actions. He has put a process in place for dealing with sin. However, what Jesus was getting at in this passage is that his disciples must have a heart of forgiveness. He wants his disciples to model his own attitude of forgiving again and again and again. Leon Morris put it like this, "From the world's point of view a sevenfold repetition of an offence in one day must cast doubt on the genuineness of the sinner's repentance. But that is not the believer's concern. His business is forgiveness."¹³

Cyril of Alexandria (375-444 AD) was the Patriarch of Alexandria in the early fifth century. Preaching on this verse, he compared forgiveness to the work of a medical doctor. He said, "We . . . must rather imitate those whose business it is to heal our bodily diseases and who do not care for a sick person once only or twice, but just as often as he happens to become ill."¹⁴

So, a disciple of Jesus forgives the repentant sinner repeatedly.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed sin in Luke 17:1-4, we should not cause others to sin and we should forgive when sinned against.

Philip Ryken tells us that King Louis XII was cast into prison and kept in chains before eventually rising to the throne of France. The story is also told that upon his ascension to power, his close advisors urged him to seek deadly revenge by every means of violence. In response to their entreaties, Louis XII prepared a scroll listing the names of all the enemies who

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 256.

¹⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, "Commentary on Luke," in *Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 266.

had committed crimes against his royal person. Opposite every name he inscribed a cross in red ink. Surely the men who committed these misdeeds would have to die!

Word of the king's blood-red list soon reached his enemies, who assumed the crosses meant that they were dead men and fled for their lives. But then Louis XII clarified his true and surprising intention. He said, "The cross which I drew beside each name was not a sign of punishment but a pledge of forgiveness extended for the sake of the crucified Savior, who upon His cross forgave His enemies and prayed for them."¹⁵

Jesus was completely innocent and sinless. He was sinned against. And yet, he forgave those who sinned against him.

Apart from the grace of God, you and I are not able to forgive as Jesus did. God's grace not only grants us forgiveness, but by the work of his Holy Spirit he empowers us to forgive others as Jesus forgave his enemies.

Who has sinned against you? Is there someone who has wronged you? Go to that person and show him his sin. If he repents, wonderful! Then forgive him. And if he sins repeatedly against you, forgive him again and again.

But you say that you cannot forgive him. Of course you cannot do so in your own strength and power. You need the power of the indwelling Spirit of God to enable you to grant forgiveness. So, ask God today to give you a spirit of forgiveness so that you can forgive the person who has sinned against you. Amen.

¹⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 207–208.

Mission Statement

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for Jesus' teaching on dealing with sin in the community of disciples. Jesus' teaching is always so clear and so practical.

O God, I pray that we never cause people to fall down spiritually or lead them sinfully astray. May we never be the cause of someone else's sin. May we never hinder someone else's growth in godliness and grace.

Our Father, we know that all people in all ages and in all cultures struggle with sin. We struggle with sin. And we know everyone around us struggles with sin too. When we see sin in a brother help us to confront him graciously. And when we are sinned against, help us to forgive the person who has sinned against us, even if we are sinned against again and again.

May we be known as forgiving persons.
And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!